

Our View: Drought is over; MID has a plan

April 2, 2011

If the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission OKs the proposal, 70,000 more acre-feet would be captured.

What nice weather we're having in the San Joaquin Valley. We are not just talking about the welcome sunshine this week but the weeks of wet weather that preceded it. In the thirsty Valley, rainy is good weather.

We've had so much rain in the Valley and snow in the Sierra that we've officially come to the end of three years of drought.

Then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proclaimed a drought emergency for the state in the summer of 2008. On Wednesday, Gov. Jerry Brown declared the drought is over.

But Brown's was a cautious proclamation, and appropriately so: "While this season's storms have lifted us out of drought, it's critical that Californians continue to watch their water use. Drought or no drought, demand for water in California always exceeds supply."

That is true. We know that very well in the Valley, where our farm-based economy has been damaged by a lack of agricultural water.

The Merced Irrigation District is pursuing a plan that will increase storage at Lake McClure by 70,000 acre-feet a year in years like this. As part of its Federal Energy Regulatory Commission relicensing, the MID is asking for permission to increase the height of spillway gates and raise the elevation of the ungated spillway by 10 feet.

The \$40 million cost will be paid by the MID, not the state or federal government. The proposal has the endorsement of both California senators and all five of the Valley's congressmen.

MID General Manager John Sweigard and Bryan Kelly, the MID's director of regulatory compliance and government affairs, water, presented the plan to the Sun-Star's editorial board Thursday.

Kelly said the extra 70,000 acre-feet would be captured about every three years, based on previous drought cycles. The extra water storage would last for two to eight weeks, encroaching about a quarter mile into the 122.5-mile Wild and Scenic River designated area up the Merced River from where Lake McClure ends.

Kelly called it a cost-effective way to replenish the groundwater, produce an extra 10,000 megawatts of electricity and help with flood control. The application is due in October to the FERC.

There are some environmental concerns about encroaching in the Wild and Scenic area, but Kelly said that will be temporary and the MID is taking concerns seriously.

"This year is a prime example of when this project would have been beneficial," Sweigard said. The extra water from the Sierra runoff could have been redirected to farmers in the district. The runoff replenishes the groundwater when it is released into the unpaved canals and when farmers spread it in their fields and orchards.

Water conservation must be a way of life for the Golden State, not just discarded when the rain comes again as it did this year. We think the MID's plan is a good way to conserve water and to ensure that more water goes underground where it will be available the next time drought returns.

Reservoirs are brimming statewide and rivers are running high.

Federal regulators say they will deliver 100 percent of water requested to urban customers of the federal water project. Water officials are still promising just 65 percent of Central Valley Project allocations. But that number could be adjusted upward after hydrologists factor in the latest snowpack data.

We hope the next time we have a wet year, the MID will be able to capture the extra water. We want the FERC to approve its plan.

Editorials are the opinion of the Merced Sun-Star editorial board. Members of the editorial board include Publisher Debra Kuykendall, Executive Editor Mike Tharp, Editorial Page Editor Keith Jones, Online Editor Brandon Bowers and visiting editor Mary Hofmann.

<http://www.mercedsunstar.com/2011/04/02/1836034/our-view-drought-is-over-mid-has.html#>

Correction

April 5, 2011

Because of the Editor's error, the editorial Saturday on the Merced Irrigation District's plans, to increase storage at Lake McClure incorrectly stated that the MID had the support of both California Senators. Neither Senator has weighed in on this issue. The Sun-Star regrets the error.